

"Musadzi u fara lufhanga nga hu fhiraho"¹ Life stories of Black women leaders in South Africa

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Abstract

This article, based on a Black feminist perspective, examines the multifaceted personal and professional lives of Black women elementary school principals in South Africa at the intersection of institutional and political, cultural and language, economic and social/historical sites as they work to actualise socially just and equitable learning environments for Black children and youth. The thrust of this work is to show how particular life experiences (profoundly affected by race, class, gender and language) affect individuals in their professional lives and in their political commitment to social justice.

The argument raised in this work is that despite (or because of) the difficulties in gaining an education and positions of school leadership, the three women in this article have developed a strong sense of commitment to social justice which is demonstrated by their caring as educational leaders whilst at the same time struggles with efficiency, responsibility and dealing with the numerous difficulties (bureaucratic and other) of managing a school.

The metaphor

There is a powerful metaphor prevalent among African ethnic groups of South Africa; it is "*Musadzi u fara lufhanga nga hu fhiraho*". This is a Tshivenda version, which, if directly translated, means that women are forced to hold knives by their sharpest edge. The meaning is derived from the multiple roles women are expected to fulfil. In another sense a woman has to face the challenges of life and succeed through thick and thin. This metaphor may serve two purposes. On the one hand it may be understood as a symbol of struggle, resistance, obduracy and strength. On the other hand it may be seen as a symbol of hope, faith, courage, and words of wisdom.

The leadership roles in the lives of these Black women² can be likened to persons holding the sharp edges of knives, "*Musadzi u fara lufhanga nga hu fhiraho*", where women are cut

¹ Meaning, "Holders of the sharp edges of knives" in the Tshivenda language. The other eight ethnic languages are: isiNdebele, isiSwati, isiXhosa, isiZulu, sepedi, sesotho, Setswana and Xitsonga/Tshangaan.

² The original research reported here comes from a PhD completed at Michigan State University in 2000.

without mercy. For instance women are expected to be caring, be the mothers of other people's children and at the same time struggle with efficiency, responsibility and dealing with the numerous difficulties (bureaucratic and other) of managing a school. As a result women have to acquire strategies for holding these knives without being cut, and knowing how to navigate tensions within and across the personal, public and professional fields. Black women school leaders are compelled to learn how to navigate across the tension created by culture, language, and customary laws. Hence their source of domination is neither race nor gender, but a complex of many factors interlocking simultaneously to create their existence.

Various scholars suggest that the extent of our understanding depends upon the genre in which our experiences are created (Collins, 1998; Hooks, 1981, Smith, 1983; White, 1984). Thus a South African discourse may fail according to the Western mainstream feminist yardstick which uses the either/or view of race and gender rather than the and/both view. For Black women the question is "how are you oppressed most – as a Black person or as a woman?" Collins's matrix of domination rejects the Eurocentric dichotomy of either/or and embraces the view of both/and. Viewing the world through a both/and conceptual lens of simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression and of the need for a humanist vision of community creates new possibilities for an empowering feminist knowledge (Collins, 1998). Black women's lives can only be understood through the interlocking categories of various constructs including race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, culture, and traditional norms. Instead of starting with gender and then adding other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class and religion, Black feminist thought sees these as distinctive systems of oppression and part of one overarching structure of domination. Collins (1998) argues that what is significant is how these systems interconnect within the systems of economic, political and ideology that support them. Interlocking axes of oppression in this regard refer to the state of interconnectedness of the systems of race, class, gender, traditional laws and other social barriers that are inextricable and linked to function as part of one overarching structure of domination.

Therefore, placing Black women in the centre of the discourse opens up possibilities for the both/and conceptual stance, one in which groups are characterised by varying degrees of penalties and privileges in one historically created system. For example, while white women are penalised by their gender they are privileged by their race, while both these constructs penalise Black women. It is therefore essential that we understand Black women's position as a complex matrix of domination that requires peeling off the multiple oppressive layers to reveal their lived experiences. According to Hooks (1990), the politics of domination refers to the ideological ground that systems of oppression share a belief in the notion of superiority and inferiority. This ideology finds expression in formal institutions such as schools, the church, the media and others.

Mainstream educational scholarship has not addressed the influence of race/ ethnicity, gender, mother-tongue/language, and class on educational policy and practice. Like the few women scholars who have made a project of examining the life experiences of minority women in leadership roles, Benham and Cooper's (1998, 3) study of nine minority women in the United States of America presents often untold stories of the lives and contributions of diverse women school leaders, in both formal and informal positions of leadership, in an effort to begin to explore "the voices that have too long been silent". Like Benham and Cooper (1998), Casey (1993), Collins (1997) Smulyan (2000), Skrla (2000) and Young (2000), among others, I believe that Black women's life experiences should not go unnoticed, but need an extensive examination to redefine what it means to Black women to be able write, tell, discuss, and analyse their life experiences against the backdrop of the prevailing discourses that seek to silence them. Bell Hooks (1990) calls this practice of silence by "those who are written and talked about, and by those who speaks it"[sic] as a measure to reduce Black people as outsiders looking into the discourse. Because white people write about Black people without adequate concrete knowledge of and contact with them,

the "politics of difference" should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalised, exploited, and oppressed Black people, especially Black women.

First, Black feminist and critical race scholars encourage Black women to recognise the vantage point of their marginality from a racist, classist, sexist hegemony and to criticise it while creating a counterhegemony through the formation of a liberating feminist theory and praxis as a collective responsibility to be shared by all. Second, school leadership theories from the feminist perspective embrace leadership for transformation for social justice. To do this, Black women should work collectively to create these ideas as a group that produces the knowledge. Critical race theory encourages teacher education to develop a pedagogy, curriculum, and research agenda that accounts for the role of race and racism in education and works to eliminate the racism. School leaders should strive to create "connected classrooms" in these "unsafe" societies.

Collins' (1991, 17) later works provide a platform for the creation of the new paradigm based on the fact that Black women intellectuals create Black feminist thought using their own concrete experiences as situated knowers in order to express a Black woman's standpoint. Furthermore, to embrace this epistemological framework, Collins suggests that the tenet required is that we should reject the pronouns "they" and "their" when describing Black women and our ideas and replace them with terms "we", "us" and "our" (Collins, 1991, 17). As a result Black feminist thought cannot challenge race, gender, and class oppression without empowering African American women. Bell Hooks (1989, 34) notes that "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story". To define Black feminist thought Collins (1991) believes that we must take cognisance of Black women, as a group who create these ideas and as a group that produce the knowledge. Core platforms in Black feminist thought stand out and are based on "the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression" that calls for the replacement of denigrated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images; Black women's activism as mothers, teachers, and Black community leaders; and sensitivity to sexual politics" (Collins, 1991, 23).

Different experiences of gender might lead to very different kinds of demands for change. And if possibilities for the transformation of gender relations lie in the instability of a performed gender identity, then the direction of change in gender order(s) also becomes unpredictable. Bonnin, Deacon, Morrell, Robinson (1998) assert that rather than being a site of unremitting reinforcement of domination gender relations, everyday performance of gender becomes the stage for the constant possibility of disrupting and challenging these relations. However, the postmodern challenge and especially the post-colonial turn has seen feminism take on board a critique which calls into question its own, previously unexplored, class and racial biases (Bonnin *et al.*, 114).

In addition, Bonnin *et al.*'s argument runs against the grain of many South African feminists who often dismiss as irrelevant postmodern debate on the fragmentation and construction of identity. It is thought that the esoteric theoretical debates of Western feminists, unconcerned with the real material struggles of ordinary poor women, will not be helpful in understanding feminist concerns in this context. Instead, the authors believe that the Western and Third World women frequently contest – albeit in different arenas, aspects of the same political, intellectual and economic heritage, and that there is much to be learned from engagement between feminists in different places (Bonnin *et al.*, 115).

While the democratic elections of 1994 signalled the end of the apartheid government of white minority rule with the birth of a non-racial government of national unity, some of the most significant issues central to the oppression of women in general, and Black African women in particular remained unchallenged and insignificant and go unremarked in the eyes of the policy makers. For instance, the Bill of Rights provides two contradictory clauses: first, the demand that an equality clause should enjoy priority in the Bill of Rights in order to pave the way for gender-

equal affirmative action; and that traditional and customary law be democratised. Whereas the first clause frees the women from gender discrimination, the second one imposes customary and traditional laws which disadvantage them. These events problematise the idea that interest can be read off location. Rural or any groups of women are at the intersection of a number of factors which constitute their identity. They navigate across many tensions; they wrestle with many social constructs which form their daily existence. Bonnin *et al.* (1998) maintain that for rural women their experiences of customary and traditional laws have not been empowering. Similarly, the idea of western women's interest is problematic and homogenising (Bonnin *et al.*, 117). The implication is that custom, culture and equality can be challenged in the public sphere but the private domain is still private and beyond the reach of the Bill of Rights.

Hence, the metaphor "*musadzi u fara lufhanga nga hu fhiraho*" provides a powerful reflection of Black women who encounter enormous challenges – women who strive under the multilayered and multiplied burdens of oppression. And often they strive and fight back through their silent resistance, and find hope within the hopelessness and through the creation of a socially just environment. Through their caring nature they create environments of hope, and succeed in linking families, schools and communities of underserved children and youth in South Africa.

Research strategy

This study sought the participation of three Black women elementary school principals in South Africa from urban/township school settings in Soweto, Johannesburg. Each professional's story is unique as it illuminates individual experiences of addressing pressing issues concerning race, gender, class, segregation, and oppression. While each story presents lessons learned (practical tools) that might help professional practitioners, a comparative analysis across the narratives provides rich data and informative themes which extend our understanding of the meaning of social justice that is both contextually and culturally appropriate in school settings.

The study uses the biographical narrative and phenomenological methods to collect data from three principals identified by their colleagues and communities as individuals working for social justice. Since I was interested in exploring how the three women worked for social justice in both apartheid South Africa and the new South Africa, it was necessary to capture the past in order to direct one's attention towards the present, and show how they have managed to transform it. It can be seen from Casey's (1995) work that narratives disclose diverse political projects, but also demonstrate social inclusivity and reveal progressive points of convergence. Thus all educators working for social change have a great deal to learn from the care these women give to their students, the outrage they feel towards injustice, and the way they dare to use the limited power and resources they have.

The stories were collected through a series of three interviews of 2 hours each, a one-day shadowing session, a group dialogue and document analysis. To break down what scholars (Griffin, 1989; Oakley, 1981) call the one-way male hierarchical framework of traditional interviewing techniques, my participants and I engaged in interactive and open-ended interviews, working together to arrive at what Tesch (1994, 147) calls "the heart of the matter". I employed Tesch's (1994) advice on phenomenological methods and learned to take cues from my participants' expressions, questions, and occasional sidetracks to take the level of the probe further. We engaged in talk between friends when I shared similar experiences with the women. Our interviews were in dialogue form and both the women and I revealed ourselves and reflected on our disclosures. This was made possible because as a Black elementary school principal in Soweto, I had had similar experiences at various points in my life as an educational leader. Because of these mutual disclosures, the women were able to open up and we developed a more intimate relationship. In their opinion, our dialogues were non-judgmental and my body language assured the women that I believed in their sincerity in the telling of their true experiences.

The processes of data analysis and synthesis were conducted through thematic analysis and coding. Naturalistic qualitative enquiries tend to produce large quantities of data. Since I used three interviews, shadowing, group dialogues, and documentation to collect the data, it was likely that I would become what Rudestam and Newton (1992) call "the victim of data overload" (113). Thus, the phenomenological analysis of transcribed data was done on a continuous basis as the process of interviewing went on. To do this, I discussed emerging themes with my participants at different stages in our journey. My analysis, drawing on interviews, field notes from shadowing the women, conversations from the group dialogue, and meaning derived from documents and artifacts generated the theme: "Black women school principals' struggles to forge social justice in schools".

Introducing holders of the sharp edges

The knives in this study do not symbolise blades of ceremonial, emblematic, ritual implements or of exchange as perceived by Blackmun and Hautelet (1990), but tools and weapons of power, designed and designated to cut and shred. As a result the knives in this study symbolise resistance and courage to engage in a fight against the cutting blades of inequalities, oppression, domination and subordination.

For lack of relevant South African names of knives, I decided to use the names of the materials that are used for wrapping the knives to reflect their differences and similarities. For instance, copper, steel, lead, are not only characterised by their strength, but are also considered soft, malleable and durable. Having decided upon distinctions among the symbolically powerful knives, I undertook to link their unique individual characteristics with those of each of the three women participants in the study by establishing a naming process.

I named the first woman 'Copper', "The creator of opportunities", because she exposes others to opportunities. She goes out, tirelessly, in search of other avenues in order to uplift her school and environment. She attracted the likes of the German Embassy, and her school is one of the few elementary schools that offer German. In her 25 years as an educator, she has been a teacher, Head of Department (HOD) and is currently in her 10th year as an elementary school principal. The second woman was named 'Steel', "The driver not the engine", because she uses the metaphor of a driver, who has no control of the car if the engine is in a bad condition. Her 18 years of experience as an educator include teaching at her present school, as radio announcer, high school teacher, and subject advisor at a regional level, adult night school teacher/head and a church elder. She is in her 7th year as an elementary school principal. I named the third woman 'Lead', "The mother who puts children first", because Lead's story revolves around children and the love she has for them. In her 21 years as an educator, she has been a high school teacher, HOD, and deputy principal of a high school before attaining her present position in January 1990.

The women in this study were educated under apartheid's Bantu Education system in the early 1960s. As a result they all received their elementary education in their mother tongue instruction. Copper was born and raised in the rural areas, whereas the other two women were born in the cities, but had to go to the rural areas for their secondary schooling. This was in line with Verwoerd's grand plan of separate development. It is clear that these women would have had very different childhood experiences given their diverse upbringings. From their stories, like the metals used to wrap the African knives, these women epitomise strength, resistance, dependability, reliability, and inner power.

What might we learn from the holders of the sharp blades?

One of the purposes of this research is to define what it means to women to live, work, lead and create environments conducive to social justice for children and youth against the backdrop of the prevailing discourse that seeks to silence them. Tyack and Cuban (1995) state that all people and institutions are products of history, the past events; therefore, people use history to interpret the past events when they make choices about the present and future. From the stories told by these women, it is evident that the past history of apartheid and its oppressive nature had a great impact on the shaping and moulding of their unique individual identities in making them who they are in the South Africa of today.

The theme, "Black women school principals' struggles to forge social justice in schools" runs through all three women's life stories. The women's stories demonstrated the significance of education in uplifting people's social status. The theme is revealed through the struggles these particular Black women had to face to gain a scholarly education and reach the positions where they are today; challenges of multiple roles, gender, and ethnicity which contributed greatly to both the quantity and quality of their leadership. What these women have learned through their own stories of struggle is reflected in their strong commitment to social justice and the work they do as caring school leaders as they struggle to forge social justice in their practice.

Personal and public struggle to gain a scholarly education

Personal struggle to gain a scholarly education

On a personal level the challenges of multiple roles contributed greatly to both the quantity and quality of scholarly education attained:

After working for a few years, I decided to go to the university for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree on a full-time basis. My two young children lived with my parents in Gazankulu (Copper).

I started teaching with a JC qualification and a PTC in 1972. I then corresponded for my Matric in 1975 and completed it in 1978. And on top of it all, I was working a fulltime job, being a mother, wife, and community leader, and still, expected to succeed (Steel).

Armed with only a BA, it was difficult reading for a BED from UNISA, being a mother of two young ones and also expecting a third one. I remember I was expecting my son when I went to my graduation in 1988. My younger daughter was only one year old (Lead).

It is clear from these statements that to gain a scholarly education has been a continuous personal struggle for these three women. In theory however, these women are expected to do well and attain a scholarly education; in practice, though, gender remains a site of struggle where women are expected to carry out a multitude of roles: motherhood, spouse, educator, leader of communities and so forth, and at times, with very limited support from their partners, spouses, colleagues and seniors.

Public struggle to gain a scholarly education

On a public level the women revealed some powerful forces that had to be overcome to gain a scholarly education. Among the factors that impeded the women's progress were:

- the nature of Bantu education that was neither free nor compulsory;
- lack of and or limited number of secondary schools in urban/city areas;
- limited access to post-secondary education; and
- race, gender, ethnicity and cultural barriers.

Bantu education that was neither free nor compulsory

Education was not a free commodity for Black people in South Africa. In addition African students did not receive any form of funding or financial support from non-governmental organisations and other institutions. With these constraints in mind, along with being children of parents with low socio-economic capacity, very few Black students managed to attain high levels of scholarly education. Moreover the Bantu Education Act of 1954 expected African people to finance their own education which was at the same time in the hands and control of the white minority government. As a result the women in this study revealed that they had had a great struggle to overcome financial constraints to gain a scholarly education. Steel shares her views in an interview in which she said:

Even though I was always top in my class, after completing Std 8, I had nobody to take me further on. Since education for Black people was neither free nor compulsory, and there were no free bursaries or scholarship for Black people in those years, I just had trust in God to see me through (Steel).

Lack of and or limited number of secondary schools in urban/city areas

Added to these limitations, there were very few secondary schools in the urban areas. As a result of the rules and regulations of the Bantu Education Act which was in support of and also supported by the whole apartheid plan, the government built secondary schools in the rural areas in an effort to push Africans to the homelands or the so-called Bantustans. Consequently all three women received their training in the rural areas. From the women's stories it is evident that they were forced to go to the rural areas in search of a scholarly education. Steel described her experiences:

I attended public schools in Tshiawelo Township where I started in Sub A and then continued until I passed my Std 6 before going to Venda. By the way, I had to go to the homeland since there were no high schools for Black children, especially in the area where I lived, which was predominantly for the Vhavenda and Matshangana groups (Steel).

Limited access to post-secondary education

To gain a scholarly education, the women were faced with constraints created by limited access to higher education. In addition access to university education was also defined in terms of race and gender. To a lesser extent Black men had the opportunity to go to universities, but for Black women it was a greater struggle just to gain admission. For example, Lead, who is the only woman who received a university education after high school indicates that although she met easily the basic requirements for a Medical or BSc degree, she was told in no uncertain terms that those careers were not for Black women. In her own words she describes the experience, and says:

Although, however, I met the required number of points for admission to either a Medical or BSc Degree at a university, my application was not approved because I was a Black woman. It was rare for a Black woman to qualify to enter a university! (Lead).

Race, gender, ethnicity and cultural barriers

These women talk about apartheid laws, apartheid education and apartheid this and that without making connections between apartheid and race, without conceiving the constructs as interlocking systems created by the racial apartheid laws.

In our principals' meeting, I'm seen as a Mutshangana woman first before I become a person. My being a school principal of a very successful school is secondary to my ethnicity. Our present government ignores this problem and concentrates on racial difference. You may not have thought about this, but race does not play a big role in our

daily lives in our schools. I mean, we do not have white schools in Soweto, we do not interact with white people on a constant basis and I do not witness oppression in my everyday existence (Copper).

Being a Muvenda woman has its disadvantages, too. In a way, you are expected to do more as a female teacher than men. As the only HOD, and also a woman, I had a hard time. When I was an HOD of African Languages at a high school, there was a Zulu male teacher who did not like to take instructions from a woman. And since the Deputy principal was also a woman, the principal as the only man in the leading position in this high school, this was seen as an anomaly. The old man used to complain and make remarks such as 'this school is under a petticoat government' (Steel).

I had problems, both as a new principal in a primary school setting and also as a woman leading men. You know what, even the children had no concept of a female principal. Whenever I enter their various class they would say, "Good morning/afternoon Sir." It took a while for these kids to get used to the idea that I am a woman and they should address me as 'Mam'. Besides, I thought women would be on my side, what a joke. It was like they were rejoicing, trying to see this woman who thinks she is a man (Lead).

On the other hand, achievement of higher education has no great influence on our culture. At home we are still expected to do our chores when our husbands sit and read newspapers. And also, our cultural background taught us to want to satisfy our partner at the expense of our happiness (Lead).

It is evident from the above comments that these women are looking at ethnicity as an independent variable of racism. Copper is looking at the effects without looking at their causes, by acknowledging that she grew up in Gazankulu, a homeland or rather Bantustan assigned to the Matshangana people. This is to acknowledge racism since the Homeland Act was one product of the racist apartheid government. By acknowledging that she was compelled to further her scholarly education while being a mother, wife and teacher is to acknowledge that Bantu education, which was designed to perpetuate the racist government, was based on race. Copper's present school was built in an area assigned for the Matshangana group and moreover, the school's buildings look exactly the same as most schools in Soweto. The dilapidated building lacks basic facilities such as sports fields, laboratories, administration building and so forth. These and other inequalities were created and founded on racial differences. So, what is Copper's understanding of race and ethnicity? From the women's conversations, racism is reflected, portrayed and revealed in different forms which are too subtle to see or understand. With the exception of Lead, who grew up with the awareness of racial inequality as a result of her socialisation and, taking into account that her father was a political activist, all the other women fail to see the bigger part of the iceberg that is submerged deep down at the bottom of the sea, the bigger part of the race dialogue.

To these women, gaining a scholarly education is an unending struggle because they also face challenges from their spouses who tend to feel inferior and overshadowed by their wives' achievements. Steel notes:

But higher education can also be a barrier, for, when you are more educated than your husband, it is always a challenge. The best thing is to encourage him to study too. Because I don't want to leave him behind, and I don't want him to feel that I'm superior to him. Because of our traditional norm, we have to accommodate our husband's fears.

Caring leadership and a strong commitment to social justice

One of the main objectives of education is the capacity to deliver a democratic existence that guarantees basic political rights for all the citizens. On a theoretical level, democratic ideals are noble and fundamental, but on a practical level, they are visible to a lesser extent. In view of the

foregoing stories, the three women's personal and public struggle to gain a scholarly education confirms Ropers-Huilman's (1998, 150) assertion "the feminist teaching discourse that is grounded in a mission of social justice and, in the context of that mission, in finding and creating connections with others, both in and outside classrooms".

The three school leaders define leadership and social justice that reflect a grounded mission to deliver a democratic existence. They state that:

I was always committed to my work, even in the earlier years of my teaching when teachers would go on strikes and boycotts. I never supported the ideology of "Liberation before Education." I believed that education was important and that oppression will never be lifted without education ... Parents from as far as Meadowlands and Tshiwelo bring their children to this school because we are trying to produce the best result, even in these conditions. Most parents removed their kids from the former Model C schools because they believe that what we are offering is as good as what those white schools offer. Why should our poor Black parents have to pay all those high fees and transport costs when we can deliver the same goods? I created a Model C school right in their own back yards (Copper).

I have been involved in adult education, and I taught quite a number of people and some of them have made it in life, and for me this is social justice. Giving someone an opportunity they would otherwise not get. And I organise classes for the students who are taking the course for Tshivenda Grade 12. And by the way, I do not get paid for the service, I have to foot the bill, drive them to their homes after our sessions, and at times provide them with food and transport fares (Steel).

The women in this study believe that strong commitment to social justice is demonstrated by leadership that is based on caring, warmth, sympathy, fairness and firmness. "I like to be seen as a good leader, as somebody who is trying to change the status of others for the best." Although they perceive the term social justice as confusing, they demonstrate an insight into what unjust practices are. They maintain that when we have social justice, this occurs when everybody is treated fairly and has equal access to things like schools (Model C education in your backyard), health care services, jobs, housing, and freedom of speech.

In their effort to respond to the limitations created by the Bantu education system, the women participated in creating socially just schools by creating opportunities for their children and communities. Evidence from these stories ranges from fundraising campaigns, bringing outsiders like European communities in for the cause of justice, creating opportunities like vegetable gardens where destitute families could get basic nutrients just to survive one more day. These women envision the state where education would bring equality and provide equal opportunities for Black children. In their practice of creating socially just learning environments, the women put children first. While education is primarily for the liberation of individuals and community, it is also significant as a means to ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship. These women see education as a vehicle to eradicate the ravages of the past and the inequalities of apartheid.

The crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education in South Africa occurred within a social framework which was designed to perpetuate the aims of segregated society. How can social justice become an aim of such a society? Several scholars have addressed and problematised this question while outlining some items on a social justice agenda (Hooks, 1984; Ropers-Huilman, 1998; Collins, 1998; Foster, 1990). First, the goal of social justice education has been attained and there is equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Feminist writers such as Bunch *et al.* hold that education is not just a victory for oneself but for the Black race as a whole. Seen from this vantage point education is an essential tool for survival in the world. Second, Hooks (1989) maintains that our priority should be to ensure

that all women can read and write. Third, Foster (1990) argues that change cannot come from the classrooms and school alone, but has to correspond with societal changes; failure of education should not be blamed on parents or students because they did not create the societal conditions. Consequently we may not blame the women's parents for failing to provide access and support for higher education. Finally although it is not true that schooling creates equal opportunities or provides the answer to all oppression in societies, it is true that improved schooling will increase the likelihood for individuals and groups to improve their status and make a great contribution to their communities and society in general. Indeed, the women's revelations have proven and supported the claim that improved schooling is a vehicle of social mobility.

Theorising the experiences of the knife holders

African women are the holders of the sharpest-edged knives. As the most oppressed group in the society, they face interlocking systems of oppression created by apartheid policies and a long-rooted culture of traditional obligations. To define African women is to embrace the and/both view of race, gender, ethnicity, traditional obligations, and language/mother tongue. Judging by the issues raised, articulated, elaborated and visualised, it is evident that emerging from life under apartheid where citizens could hardly express their opinion, be treated fairly or given opportunities or access to basic human rights, they could hardly be expected to have in mind a full set of social justice attributes. These are women who strive and navigate under the multilayers and multiplied burdens of oppression, at the same time creating schools and environments that are socially just and equitable for children and youth. And they do so at their own expense.

In general these women see gender discrimination as a direct result of organisational behaviours. Moreover these women perceive gender discrimination in terms of institutional oppression created by the workings of apartheid. For example concerns such as salary, benefits, and access to employment for married women were purposefully separated from mainstream gender discrimination and seen as the product of apartheid rather than as a social construct created and supported by men. From these stories, men's role in the domination of women was considered as customary obligation and was not necessarily seen as a role created with the approval of African men themselves.

It is rather difficult to define the term *culture* in such a way that it embraces every meaning derived from different life experiences. Culture is a social construct and should be perceived as such. Therefore different people will give it different meanings as a result of their different historical life experiences. We tend to look at culture as if it was cemented through time. Culture, as a tradition, impacted on who these women are as school principals today. It may be that African traditional norms are misunderstood. In their essence, they are not meant to discriminate against nor oppress women. As is obvious from the stories provided in this study it is clear that women have mixed feelings about their roles and positions in the customary stratification. Although they believe that men dominate and oppress them in various forms, they also agree that men have the right to do so.

After these deliberations what comes to mind are the questions: "What is the definition of ethnicity?" And what is our understanding of race? Why is racism so obvious and yet so invisible? Horowitz (1991) sees ethnicity as a purely divisive and negative phenomenon, which needs to be balanced by recognition of the positive dimension in the intellectual, political and academic levels that will transcend education. Horowitz (1991, 35) maintains that South African society is not difficult to classify because:

It is characterised, above all by what is appropriately called *ascriptive ranking*. There are superordinates and subordinates, largely defined by birth criteria. To be sure, within the ranks of each stratum, there are also cleavages that divide, in some variables measure,

Afrikaans speakers from English speakers, Zulu from Xhosa and Tswana, and so on. But the overall design of the society is predicated on racial hierarchy, and the significance of those alternative cleavages is, at least temporarily, suppressed.

While the women acknowledge the great strides taken by the new democratic government to address imbalances, they maintain that there still remain grave inequalities in the provision of education for Black and white children. Their own efforts to bring about equity and social justice include extensive fundraising campaigns, creation of jobs through funds raised by parents, allocating portions of land for vegetable gardens, and other efforts. The women hold the belief that leaders and educators are charged as servants of the nation, to serve other people and enhance justice and equity and that a socially just environment is an environment where there is no crime and everybody is free and has a right to live. Education is charged with racial uplifting, increasing respect and self-esteem and over time leads to the elimination of racism. Education as a human basic right is charged with the fundamental task of creating equality regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender. What emerges from their stories is that social justice practices are reflected by our deeds as leaders: how we lead, how we extend ourselves to others, what we bring to make their lives better.

Conclusion

It is evident from the three women's narratives that a limiting situation can indeed be transformed, however small and minute the action may seem. All the same the possibility of transformation exists. The women may not have perceived their achievement and their efforts to serve others as liberating actions and strides to free themselves, but as the end results and goals of social justice education. The goal of social justice education is met and there is equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs (Adams, Bell & Griffin 1997). From Adams *et al.*'s point of view, social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. They envision a society in which individuals are both self-determined (able to develop their full capacity) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility towards and with others and to society as a whole.

In essence, when the issues of social justice are at the heart of our schools, our teachers, students, parents and community at large benefit from the teaching of social justice education. Weiler (1988) believes that teaching to achieve social justice is at the core of democratic education. It serves as a reminder not only of the inequalities and biases that continue to wear away the foundation of democratic values, but of the powerful stories which inspire us to work towards change to make the world a better place. In general, organisational change and social justice are of paramount significance at this stage of South African history; in particular and most important, social justice is central to the lives of women and especially Black women who are defined through multiple burdens of oppression.

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